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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with adolescents' response levels on seven measures of political alienation: powerlessness, discontentment, cynicism, detachment, hopelessness, elitism, and democratic deficiency. Using a random sample of 269 Hartford, Connecticut high school students surveyed in May 1976, political alienation levels are found to be relatively high, with 55 percent of the sample expressing political dissaffection. Intercorrelations between the seven political alienation indicators show all measures to be highly associated with one another. Furthermore, two underlying dimensions, one system-oriented and the other individual-oriented, emerge when the seven alienation indicators are factor analyzed. Finally, a multiple regression analysis indicates that demographic-categoric factors have a negligible effect on adolescents' political alienation levels. Three possible political alienation antecedents are discussed in relation to possible means by which the educational system might contend with student political alienation. (Author)

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URBAN ADOLESCENTS AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM:

DIMENSIONS OF DISAFFECTION

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with adolescents' response levels on seven measures of political alienation: powerlessness, discontentment, cynicism, detachment, hopelessness, elitism, and democratic deficiency. Using a random sample of 269 Hartford, Connecticut high school students surveyed in May 1976, political alienation levels are found to be relatively high, with 55 percent of the sample expressing political disaffection. Intercorrelations between the seven political alienation indicators show all measures to be highly associated with one another. Furthermore, two underlying dimensions, one system-oriented and the other individual-oriented, emerge when the seven alienation indicators are factor analyzed. Finally, a multiple regression analysis indicates that demographic-categoric factors have a negligible effect on adolescents' political alienation levels. Three possible political alienation antecedents are discussed in relation to possible means by which the educational system might contend with student political alienation.

Urban Adolescents and the

Political System: Dimensions of Disaffection

Educators, in planning the secondary school curricula, usually do not take into account students' sociopolitical values and attitudes (Long and Strong, 1977a; Long and Strong, 1977b). This state of affairs probably makes little difference in implementing the science or mathematics curricula, but the success or failure of the social studies curricula, for example, might be considerably dependent on its relationship to the sociopolitical orientations of the students for which it has been designed. Moreover, not only the content of such a curriculum must be appropriate for specific student clientele, but the style with which the curriculum is taught must also be positively received by students if social studies goals are to be effected (Long and Long, 1974; Long, 1974b; Long and Long, 1975).

This paper reports on a set of political attitudes, which should be especially pertinent to the secondary school curricula, particularly the social studies, feelings of political alienation. Research over the past decade has shown that feelings of political alienation have not only been steadily increasing, but, in fact, are presently at an all-time high among American adults (Wright,1976). Unfortunately, the utility of these findings is greatly restricted for educational planners for two reasons. First, because the data are limited to adult samples; and second, because the research is typically limited to two dimensions of political alienation, powerlessness and distrust.

In overcoming these two deficiencies, the research reported here has set three objectives in studying feelings of political alienation among urban

adolescents. First, adolescents' responses to seven different dimensions of political alienation will be reported. Second, the intercorrelations between the adolescents' responses on these seven different dimensions will be investigated. Third, the effect of adolescents' attributes on these measures of political alienation will also be ascertained.

Sample. The data for this study were collected by means of a written questionnaire, which was self-administered by a random sample of 269 students enrolled in two public, inner-city high schools in Hartford, Connecticut in May 1976. In making their responses on the questionnaire, these students were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, which should contribute to the validity of the findings reported here.

In composition, the student sample was comprised of more girls (64%) than boys (36%) and more blacks (45%) than whites (44%) or Hispanics (11%). Twenty-nine percent of the students were freshmen, 17 percent were sophomores, 26 percent were juniors, and 28 percent were seniors. Twenty-three percent of the students reported earning A grade-point-averages, 53 percent had earned Bs, 22 percent had earned Cs, and the remainder (3%) reported earning Ds or Fs. Finally, approximately 40 percent of the students' parents had grade school education levels, 35 percent of the parents were high school graduates, and 25 percent had attended or graduated from college.

Results. The most frequently encountered political alienation indicator is powerlessness or inefficacy (Abramson, 1972). Considerable research and theory in the social sciences suggests that as levels of political powerless-

ness increase, political participation declines. Moreover, if feelings of political powerlessness remain at abnormally high levels, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the functioning of a democratic political system (Milbrath, 1965).

The Hartford students' responses to one such measure of political powerlessness (Olsen, 1969) appear in Table 1, where two findings are of particular interest. First, it is noteworthy that one student in two responds, on the average, in the politically alienated direction on this measure. And, interestingly, on the four items on this measure, four out of five students agree with the one stating that the operations of the sociopolitical system are so complex that they cannot be understood. With half of these students exhibiting feelings of political powerlessness, it must be concluded that the social studies program is faced with a major obstacle in achieving its civic education goals, especially those germane to encouraging greater political involvement and participation (Patterson, 1960).

A second dimension of political alienation, less commonly found in the journalistic and professional literature, concerns reactions to public policy outputs from the political system (Olsen, 1969). In this case, it is assumed that the more an individual is discontented with what the government is or is not doing, the greater the individual's political alienation level. Two patterns of response are evident on such an attitudinal measure in Table 2. Again, as with the measure of political powerlessness, one out of two of the Hartford students evinces dissatisfaction with public policy outputs. Furthermore, the source of this dissatisfaction is not that the government is incapable of solving problems or that the wrong interests are being represented,

TABLE 1. POLITICAL POWERLESSNESS ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that I can't really understand what's going on.	77.7%	16.4%	5.9%
People like me and my parents don't have any say about what the government does.	42.4	49.8	7.8
There is no way other than voting that people like me and my parents can influence actions of the government.	37.2	39.0	23.8
I believe public officials don't care much what people like me and my parents think.	50.6	27.1	22.3
Average response	52.0	33.1	15.0

TABLE 2. POLITICAL DISCONTENTMENT ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
As the government is now organized and operated, I think it is hopelessly incapable of dealing with all the crucial problems facing the country today.	39.8%	35.3%	24.9%
It seems to me that the government often fails to take necessary actions on important matters, even when people favor such actions.	62.1	14.9	23.0
These days the government is trying to do too many things, including some activities that I don't think it has the right to do.	59.1	16.7	24.2
For the most part, the government serves the interests of a few organized groups, such as business or labor, and isn't very concerned about the needs of people like my parents and me.	44.6	29.7	25.7
Average Reponse	51.4	24.2	24.4

but rather that the government is engaging in activities that it should not, and avoiding engagement in activities it should, be involved in. Given the fact that 50 percent of these students express such policy discontentment, it is obvious that these students are relatively sophisticated in their perceptions of the system's operation and that this might make it difficult for educators to conduct a traditionally-oriented social studies curriculum.

Political theorists have repeatedly argued that the viability of a democratic political system is founded on political trust (Almond and Verba, 1963), the notion that political leaders represent the general interest, are competent, and do not cater solely to the demands of special interests. The Hartford students' responses to a measure tapping their political trust (Agger, et al., 1961) in Table 3, indicate that half of them do not manifest such trust. In this case, distrust or cynicism is most pronounced with regard to the ethics of political leaders' conduct, e.g., being influenced by financial factors, being willing to compromise basic principles to achieve political power, being too self-serving. With one of two students expressing political distrust, the challenge is clear for social studies educators.

Perhaps the most fundamental political orientation is that of identification (Easton and Dennis, 1969). Does the individual consider himself to be a member of the political system or does he consider himself an outsider? As the findings in Table 4 show, over half of the students in this sample respond in the "detached" direction to this measure of political alienation. Obviously, attitudes, not overt behaviors, are being measured here, but, even so, the implications of this finding are quite profound. Most discussions of political alienation rest on the assumption that alienation is considered by

TABLE 3. POLITICAL CYNICISM ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
Money is the most important factor influencing public policies.	76.7%	13.8%	9.7%
Politicians represent the general interest more frequently than they represent special interests. (Reflected)	38.3	24.9	36.8
In order to get nominated, most candidates for political office have to make basic compromises and undesirable commitments.	57.2	15.6	27.1
Politicians spend most of their time getting re-elected or re-appointed.	61.0	16.0	23.0
People are very frequently manipulated by politicians.	50.9	14.5	34.6
A large number of city and county politicians are political hacks.	38.3	13.0	48.7
Average Response	51.5	18.5	30.0

TABLE 4. POLITICAL DETACHMENT ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
When I think about politics and government in the United States, I consider myself an outsider.	52.4%	37.2%	10.4%
I tend to identify myself with and feel closely associated with American politics and government. (Reflected)	24.5	56.1	19.3
When I hear or read about the politics and governmental system of the United States, I feel that I am a part of that system. (Reflected)	34.9	52.4	12.6
When I think about the government in Washington, I don't feel as if it's my government.	49.4	33.8	16.7
Average Response	52.6	32.6	14.8

most people to be something to be avoided, something which the individual regrets (Schacht, 1970). These findings, and other related research (Long, 1976c), strongly suggest that adolescents today not only feel apart from the political system, but actively reject it and the values it symbolizes. Furthermore, they appear to be proud of this detached stance. With half of this sample expressing such sentiments, it would seem that certain educational objectives in the high school, particularly those pertinent to fostering a sense of community and encouraging civic involvement, would be most difficult to meet.

To this point, emphasis has been placed on adolescents' attitudes concerning the current functioning of the sociopolitical system. What sort of prognosis do they offer for the system's future? Forty percent of the Hartford students sampled view the future of the sociopolitical system as being bleak, an equal number are more sanguine in their predictions, and about 20 percent are undecided (Table 5). Since only 40 percent of these students are hopeful regarding the future and since 50 percent are politically detached from the system, the pervasiveness of the problem is clear. Earlier research has typically concluded with the notion that shifts in public policy emphases and greater discretion on the part of political leaders would result in greater political allegiance on the part of the masses. These results, however, put into question these earlier conclusions.

One comparatively unexplored political alienation dimension concerns attitudes about the source of political influence in the political system. Are most decisions made by a small elite or do the masses, or at least groups of individuals, influence major political decisions? If these Hartford

TABLE 5. POLITICAL HOPELESSNESS ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
The future of this country seems dark to me.	52.4%	33.5%	14.1%
All I can see ahead for the United States is unpleasantness, rather than pleasantness.	40.9	36.4	22.7
The future of the U.S. seems vague and uncertain to me.	55.8	28.3	16.0
I have great faith in the future of this country. (Reflected)	36.4	40.9	22.7
I can look forward to more good times for the United States than bad times. (Reflected)	42.8	26.8	30.5
I look forward to the future for this country with hope and enthusiasm. (Reflected)	57.6	21.6	20.8
Average Response	39.7	39.2	21.1

students are truly alienated, they should perceive the political system as being basically elitist in nature. The data in Table 6 indicate this to be the case, although a significant percentage (31%) of the sample appears to be uncertain of the system's decision-making structure. This finding is especially interesting, since this topic is not stressed in social studies textbooks, although the student is usually left with the impression that all citizens have relatively equal influence in the sociopolitical system (Committee on Pre-Collegiate Education, 1971).

Observers of contemporary American pre-adults have suggested that one of the greatest sources of dissatisfaction among this group is the failure to subscribe to or act upon fundamental democratic values (Coles, 1975). This observation appears to apply as well to the adolescents investigated. As the results in Table 7 indicate, 55 percent of the students perceive basic deficiencies in the system's implementation of democratic values. From the students' responses, it would seem that they are particularly disturbed regarding inequality and injustice. Two implications follow from this pattern of responses. First, it could be argued that these students, in expressing such levels of dissatisfaction, have been successfully inculcated with democratic theory. This introduces a problem for the educator, however: if such failures are stressed in the classroom, student alienation may be exacerbated; if such failures are not cited or are contradicted, student alienation may also be reinforced.

Analysis of the adolescents' responses on these seven measures of political alienation indicates a general pattern of disaffection ranging from a low of 40 percent to a high of 55 percent and averaging across all items 49

TABLE 6. ELITISM ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
In the United States, very wealthy people, such as leaders in industry and banking, have much more influence over what the government does than do most other Americans.	78.1%	13.8%	8.2%
In the United States, the major decisions made in each of the major areas of the society, such as industry, foreign affairs, race relations, and so on, are made by the same group of people.	42.4	19.7	37.9
In the United States, the major decisions made in each of the major areas of the society, such as industry, foreign affairs, race relations, and so on, represent the will of the majority of Americans. (Reflected)	36.1	33.1	30.9
In the United States, there are no elites or masses since all citizens have the opportunity to participate in politics and to influence the major decisions of the society. (Reflected)	19.0	37.2	43.9
In the United States, people who are knowledgeable about politics, skilled in public relations, and who have a lot of information about public issues have as much influence on what the government does as do people with wealth or high economic status. (Reflected)	40.1	26.0	33.8
In the United States, most major decisions that shape the future of the country are made by an elite or small group of people, and the great mass of Americans has no real chance of becoming members of this elite.	39.4	27.1	33.5
Average Response	40.6	26.0	31.4

TABLE 7. DEMOCRATIC DEFICIENCY ITEM RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain/Don't Know
People like me probably believe in basic democratic principals more than our political leaders do.	42.0%	31.2%	26.8%
This country is becoming less democratic every day.	40.1	33.1	26.8
It's very disturbing to me that the interests of some groups of people aren't fully represented in our political system.	62.1	16.4	21.6
Although our government is supposed to be based on justice for everyone, it really isn't just at all.	61.7	26.0	12.3
I regret very much that there isn't more racial equality in this country today.	57.2	22.7	20.1
No matter what the civics books say, all people are not treated politically equally.	77.0	13.0	10.0
I'm very much concerned about many people in this country today not having as much political equality as they should.	58.0	19.3	22.7
Personal liberty is something that's only written about in textbooks, not something that really exists in this country today.	37.9	35.7	26.4
Although I wish it were otherwise, no one in this country today has as much freedom as the Constitution says they should have.	59.9	21.9	18.2
Average Response	55.0	24.4	20.5

percent. This information, however, does not indicate the association between these seven dimensions of political alienation. If a student feels politically powerless, does he also feel politically detached? The correlation matrix in Table 8 answers this type of question. Given the relatively strong correlations between the seven measures of political alienation, and given the average intercorrelation in the table of 0.65, it must be concluded that these seven dimensions of political disaffection are interrelated.

This leads to a second question: Are seven dimensions of political alienation being measured in this study, or could political disaffection among these Hartford adolescents be described using a smaller number of dimensions (Simmons, 1966)? The factor analysis results reported in Table 9 show that, in fact, these seven dimensions can be reduced to two, with the initial dimension accounting for most of the variance. In this instance, the first factor might be labelled a system-oriented dimension, in that it contains high factor loadings on discontentment, cynicism, hopelessness, elitism, and democratic deficiency. On the other hand, the second factor, with high loading on powerlessness and detachment, appears to be more individual-oriented. Thus, these adolescents seem to be expressing two views of disaffection, the first, and most important, concerned with the performance of the political system, and the second view concerned more with their behavior in relationship to the system.

The third objective set for this study concerned determining the effects of students' personal characteristics on their responses to the political alienation measures. A good case could be made for political alienation occurring among girls more than boys (because the former are typically less

TABLE 8. INTERCORRELATIONS (r) BETWEEN POLITICAL ALIENATION INDICATORS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Political Powerlessness	1.00	0.85	0.62	0.80	0.49	0.70	0.65
(2) Political Discontentment		1.00	0.98	0.46	0.55	0.59	1.00
(3) Political Cynicism			1.00	0.52	0.58	0.70	1.00
(4) Political Detachment				1.00	0.48	0.51	0.49
(5) Political Hopelessness					1.00	0.35	0.62
(6) Elitism						1.00	0.64
(7) Democratic Deficiency							1.00

NOTE: All correlations corrected for attenuation.

TABLE 9. PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS FACTOR ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL ALIENATION INDICATORS

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Communalities
Political Powerlessness	0.13	0.81*	0.67
Political Discontentment	0.72*	0.24	0.58
Political Cynicism	0.77*	0.10	0.60
Political Detachment	0.20	0.77*	0.64
Political Hopelessness	0.49*	0.39	0.39
Elitism	0.56*	0.13	0.33
Democratic Deficiency	0.79*	0.18	0.66
Eigenvalue	2.94	0.93	
Percentage of Variance	42.0	13.3	

* Highest factor loading.

politically involved), occurring among non-whites more than among whites (because the former are typically more disadvantaged), occuring among freshmen more than seniors (because the former are less informed), occurring among students with lower socioeconomic status (because of their typical lack of political resources), and occurring among students with lower grade-point-averages (because of their relative lack of sophistication).

The results of a multiple regression analysis, appearing in Table 10, show all of these expectations to be incorrect. Indeed, none of these factors has a significant effect on either terminal dimension of systemic disaffection, with the exception of grade-point-average which has a slight effect on system-oriented political alienation. In this case, though, the hypothesis is also disconfirmed: the higher a student's grade-point-average, the higher the level of alienation. The most important conclusion to be drawn from these statistics, however, is that personal attributes do not have an appreciable effect on levels of student political alienation. The causes of such disaffection must reside elsewhere.

Conclusion. Four major findings emerge from this research. First, levels of political alienation appear to be moderately high among the adolescents surveyed, with about 55 percent typically expressing such disaffection. Second, the adolescents' political alienation generalizes across seven different dimensions, all of which are strongly interrelated. Third, two basic alienation dimensions are being described here, a system-oriented variant and an individual-oriented variant. Last, demographic factors have almost no effect on adolescents' feelings of political alienation.

TABLE 10. DEMOGRAPHIC-CATEGORIC VARIABLES REGRESSED ON POLITICAL ALIENATION COMPOSITE INDICATORS

	Individual-Orientation	System-Orientation
Sex	0.07	0.05
Race	-0.12	-0.03
Grade Level	-0.02	0.04
Socioeconomic Status	-0.06	0.02
Grade-Point-Average	0.03	0.14*
r^2	0.02	0.03

* Standardized regression coefficient greater than twice its standard error.

What, in fact, does influence levels of political disaffection or alienation among preadults? Recent research suggests three possible determinants, all of which have implications for the educational system. Perhaps the most powerful predictor of political alienation feelings among preadults found to date are perceptions of systemic discrimination, both on racial and economic grounds (Long, 1976c; Long, 1977a; Long, 1977c). A very strong relationship exists between such perceptions of discrimination and feelings of political alienation among adolescents. The research on this subject suggests that one reason for the strong association between these two variables is that adolescents typically manifest firm beliefs in fundamental democratic values, especially political, economic, and social equality (Long, 1974a).

Another powerful predictor of political disaffection among adolescents is perceptions of threat from the political system. Research has rather consistently shown that adolescents who are sensitive to the functioning of the political system, who view the present operations of the system as detrimentally affecting their personal well-being, or who fear the political system tend to possess high levels of political alienation (Long, 1976d; Long, 1976e; Long, 1977b). This tendency appears to emanate from the individual's need for personal freedom (Brehm, 1966). Moreover, this tendency seems most affected by critical perceptions of sociopolitical reality.

Finally, adolescents possess a predilection for irrational, illogical thinking which also contributes to high levels of political alienation. Of particular interest in this context is the adolescent's perfectionistic demands on the system, demands which derive in part from the social studies curriculum's emphasis on classical democratic theory (Long, 1976a; Long, 1976b).

In this instance, the adolescent is taught to subscribe to an idealized conception of the political system which, given the underlying structure of the social system, is impossible to implement (Levin, 1960). In any case, such idealized expectations lead to feelings of systemic disaffection among contemporary adolescents.

What can the educational system do to counter these heightened feelings of political alienation among American adolescents? First, regarding inequality in the American sociopolitical sphere, the educational system might stress the societal bases for discrimination, its historical and economic roots, and how and why it is perpetuated. Moreover, emphasis might be placed on how discrimination and inequality might be eradicated. Second, the student might be better informed about the sociopolitical system's impact on his daily life, the extent to which it actually threatens his well-being, and what measures he might employ to protect his self-interest. Last, the adolescent's propensity to make extreme demands on the sociopolitical system and to set unrealistic standards for systemic performance should be brought to the adolescent's attention, and the irrational bases of such demands and standards indicated and modified.

Inasmuch as the sociopolitical system's limitations have been especially patent in the last decade, it should be recognized that perhaps only the last suggestion can be successfully effected by educators in the near future. And, too, it should be recognized that the educational system's role in this matter is probably one concentrating on coping with adolescent political alienation, not eradicating it (Just, 1974). Still, an awareness of the political orientations of contemporary students will ease the situation of educators involved in this coping process, and may, as well, contribute to student learning in the social studies.

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